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“I will do it... but I’m asking you to do it”: On the emergence of polite imperative from promissive

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Abstract

The Korean language has a rich inventory of sentence-final particles encoding diverse grammatical notions including sentence types and the speaker’s subjective and intersubjective stances. A new imperative marker is under active development in Present-Day Korean largely motivated by discourse politeness. This emergent marker is identical in form with the promissive marker, which signals the speaker’s commitment to fulfill something for the benefit of the addressee. An analysis of the grammaticalization process involved in the functional shift reveals diverse mechanisms of morpho-syntactic and semantic changes as well as discourse politeness strategies to mitigate the face-threatening illocutionary force of commanding.

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1. Introduction

Crosslinguistically imperative is a face-threatening speech act because it is the direct expression of one of the most intrinsically face-threatening speech acts, i.e. commanding (Brown & Levinson 1987: 191)[1]. Politeness is a universal feature that can mitigate face-threatening acts. Since the use of imperative, even when it is accompanied by politeness markers, is fundamentally intrusive, other strategies are commonly evoked either to replace it or to tone down its illocutionary force. For instance, many languages including English have heavy restrictions on the use of the imperative in direct speech acts, and a wide range of devices, such as modality or interrogatives, are preferred (Wierzbicka 1991:30)[2].

In present-day Korean (PDK), an innovative imperative form is emerging, especially in service encounters. Since the emerging form makes use of an already established promissive form either identically or often by adding honorification marker, such usage is much denounced by prescriptivists for ‘misusing’ promissives and ‘violating’ honorification rules (e.g., most prominently, an Internet advisory posted by the National Institute of the Korean Language on April 16, 2003)[3]. However, the grammatical change in the minds of the language users that sanctions such language use provides descriptivists with a window into intriguing discourse strategies actively operative in discourse scenes. The objectives of this paper are twofold: to describe the emergence of this imperative form from

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the viewpoints of grammaticalization and discourse pragmatics, and to discuss the ramifications for the grammatical system in general from theoretical perspectives.

2. Preliminaries: imperatives, promissives and data

2.1. Imperatives and promissives in Korean: A cursory view

A verb-final language, Korean has many grammatical markers that occur as verbal morphology. These markers take the form of sentence-final particles (SFPs), the functions of which include marking tense, aspect, mood and modality. As is commonly attested in other languages, Korean has diverse forms for imperatives that fall under canonical and non-canonical imperatives (Aikhenvald 2010)[4]. Grammatical markers of imperatives in Korean may be classified into three major categories: specializing forms, declarative-derived forms and connective-derived forms, as shown in Table 1 (H: high; M: mid; L: low in levels of honorification).

Table 1. Imperatives in Korean

Specializing Forms	<i>-sipsio</i>	Formal, Polite, H-Honorific
	<i>-ela</i>	Formal, Polite
	<i>-(u)la</i>	Formal, Audience-Blind
	<i>-(u)sila</i>	Formal, H-Honorific, Audience-Blind
Declarative-Derived Forms	<i>-o</i>	Formal, M-Honorific, Archaic/poetic
	<i>-seyyo</i>	Informal, H-Honorific, Polite
	<i>-eyo</i>	Informal, Polite
	<i>-sye</i>	Informal, L-Honorific
	<i>-e</i>	Informal
Connective-Derived Forms	<i>-key</i>	Informal (< <i>-key</i> : mode-marker)
	<i>-keyna</i>	Informal (< <i>-key</i> : mode-marker)
	<i>-ci</i>	Informal (< <i>-ci</i> : non-finite; nominalizer)
	<i>-lyem</i>	Informal (< [?] <i>-lye</i> : intentional)
	<i>-lyemwuna</i>	Informal (< [?] <i>-lye</i> : intentional)

Since the detailed grammaticalization processes of these imperatives and their synchronic usage are beyond the scope of the immediate interest of this paper, suffice it to take note that the descriptions given in the table do not fully represent the complexities involved in actual usage. However, as shown in Table 1, it is evident that Korean makes use of intricate distinctions with respect to formality, politeness and honorification in the speech act of imperatives. These concepts are not binary distinctions of presence and absence, but are gradient notions that can be mapped onto a continuum. For instance, honorification alone can have as many as six different levels of distinctions (You 1996: 119[5], Han 2003: 86[6]). Furthermore, the levels of these variables are so delicate the perceived levels of these forms are subject to variation across individuals and across genres. All these point to the fact that Korean is fastidiously concerned with the grammatical coding of interpersonal aspects of language use, of the commanding speech act, in particular.

Another closely related grammatical category worth noting is the promissive, a category rarely attested across languages. The speech act of promissives in other languages is often realized by means of other grammatical markers, and the promissive illocution of an utterance is only understood from its context, as illustrated by English example “I will certainly come.” (Huang 2012: 250)[7]. Promissive SFPs in Korean, on the other hand, are often specializing in marking the promissive speech act. Korean promissives, as was the case with imperatives, also make speech level distinctions. For instance, Sohn (2001: 356)[8] lists following four forms of promissives.

- (1) a. intimate level: *-lkey*
 b. polite level: *-lkeyyo*
 c. plain level: *-ma*
 d. familiar level: *-(u)msey*

Promissives are intricately related to imperatives and hortatives. These related categories are often considered to constitute a single clause type, i.e. jussive, only differing in the grammatical person of their sentential subjects (see, e.g. Pak 2006[9]; Pak, Portner, Zanuttini 2008[10]). Ko (1976)[11] also recognizes the close relationship among them under the subsuming category of ‘volitive’ (N.B. the categories in his terms are promissive, imperative, propositive and preventive). Ko (1976)[11] further suggests that the difference between promissive and imperative is the presence (i.e. imperative) and absence (i.e. promissive) of the intended influence on the addressee.

2.2. Data

Among the four promissives in (1) *-lkey* and *-lkeyyo* are the forms under focus. They show distinctions in terms of politeness: The latter, *-lkeyyo*, is explicitly marked with the politeness marker *-yo* at the end, as shown in (3) through (5) below. They both mark the speaker’s commitment to the fulfillment of a proposition. Their primary (and default) usage is exemplified in (2), i.e. *-lkey* as a promissive SFP, and their emerging shifted functions into imperative (i.e. request and command) are exemplified in (3) through (5) (N.B. Following abbreviations are used in glossing: ACC: accusative; ANT: anterior; BEN: benefactive; CONN: connective; COP: copula; FUT: future; GEN: genitive; IMP: imperative; NOM: nominative; POL: polite; PROM: promissive; PROS: prospective; SFP: sentence-final particle; SIM: simultaneous; TOP: topic).

- (2) Promissive (to a friend in need of help)

(nay-ka) tow-a.cwu-lkey
 (I-NOM) help-BEN-PROM
 ‘I will help you.’

- (3) Imperative (Polite Request) (a nurse to an adult patient)

yeki chintay-ey nww-si-lkey-yo
 here bed-at lie.down-HON-IMP-POL
 ‘Please lie on your back on the bed over here.’

- (4) Imperative (Polite Request) (a nurse to a young patient at a dental clinic)

ca ip com khukey pelli-lkey-yo
 now mouth a.little wide open-PROM-POL
 ‘Now, please open your mouth wide.’

- (5) Imperative (Polite Command) (the head-nurse to a trainee)

cengli-nun nacwung-ey ha-lkey-yo
 cleanup-TOP later.time-at do-IMP-POL
 ‘Clean up later, please.’ (Do something else first.)

In the case of promissive, since the speaker is also the agent of the proposed act, the promissive sentence is compatible with the first person subject only (either singular or plural). A Korean idiosyncrasy is that the understood subject may freely be omitted as is the case with other sentential constituents, as shown in (2) above. An immediate consequence of this subject constraint has to do with honorification marking in the predicate. When the predicate is marked with honorification the understood sentential subject is not the first person. In promissive sentences the verb cannot be marked with honorification, because, self-honorification is not acceptable in any situation. However, when the promissive SFP is used to mark a request (a milder form of imperative) or a command (a stronger form of imperative), the grammatical subject of the sentence is the addressee, and, thus, may (or must, depending on the relative status of the addressee) be marked with the honorification marker *-si-*, as illustrated in (3). Because of the

omissibility of the sentential subject, the only signal that forces the addressee to interpret the sentence as an imperative is the honorification marker. Therefore, when the sentence is not marked with honorification, as in (4) and (5), the addressee has two possible interpretations, e.g. “Now, please open your mouth wide” (imperative) and “Now, I will open my mouth wide.” (promissive) for (4); and “Clean up later, please.” (imperative) and “I will clean up later.” (promissive) for (5). Since promissive marking is the default function of *-lkey*, the addressees adopt the first interpretation, which, however, is situationally incongruous. The addressees are forced to look for a more amenable alternative interpretation, i.e. imperative, and this uncomfortable situation leads them to denounce this flagrant ‘violation’ of grammar. However, the motivation behind this innovation is so strong and appealing that the usage is fast spreading across speech situations, especially in service encounter genres (see discussion in 4).

3. Grammaticalization

The promissive SFP *-lkey* and *-lkeyyo* is a resultant form of multi-morphemic bonding involving the disappearance of a word boundary (#) and phonological change across morpheme boundaries (-). The source construction involves a prospective adnominal (*-l*), a semantically-bleached noun (*kes* ‘thing’), a copula (*i-*), a SFP (*-e*) and optionally a politeness marker (*-yo*). The development can be schematically represented as in (6):

- (6) *-l* # *ke(s)-i-e-yo* > *-lkey-yo* > *-lkey-yo*
 PROS.ADN thing-COP-SFP-POL **FUT/PROM-POL** **PROM-POL**
 ‘(It) will be a thing that...’ ‘(It) will be that...’/‘I will...’ ‘I will’

As shown in (6), a string of linguistic forms which is used to mark a statement as to a future event became a promissive marker. The resultant form is still analyzable with respect to politeness marking, i.e. *-lkeyyo*, if so marked, and *-lkey*, if not. The source construction with the compositional meaning gradually changed into a construction which is functionally ambiguous between the futurity marking SFP (often with the ‘conjunctural’ meaning) as in (7) and the promissive SFP as in (8), with a concomitant change of phonological reduction. The futurity-marking function has become largely obsolete, or marginally survives with a genre-specific archaic flavor.

- (7) *kansin-i iss-awa sinin-uy mal-ul tus-ci ani ha-lkey-yo*
 traitor-NOM exist-as god-woman-GEN word-ACC listen-CONN not do-FUT-POL
 ‘As there are traitors, (the king) will not listen to what the god-woman says.’
 (Pakssipwuincen Movable-type ed., 16xx)
- (8) *kuliko hA-la-nun tAylo ta hA-lkey-yo*
 and do-IMP-SIM.ADN as all do-PROM-POL
 ‘and I promise I will do whatever you tell me to.’
 (Kim Kyoje, *Moktanhwa* 226, 1911)

As is shown in the above, the central element of the promissive is the noun *kes* ‘thing’ whose semantics became increasingly bleached from ‘thing, skin, surface’ (Hong 1983)[12] throughout the development. The defective noun status can be traced back to Middle Korean (10th - 15th c.) (Huh 1983[13], Jeong 1987[14], Lee 1988[15], Park 1999[16]). The developmental path up to the point of the imperative, an emerging function in PDK, which is the focus of the present investigation, can be represented in six stages as in (9):

- (9) Stages of the development of imperative
- Stage 1: Regular noun; *kes* ‘thing, skin, surface’ (Middle Korean)
ceki haya-n kes-un pay-i-a
 there be.white-ANT.ADN **thing-TOP** boat-COP-SFP
 ‘The white thing over there is a boat.’
- Stage 2: Defective Noun *kes/ke* ‘thing’ (Middle Korean)
i kamca-nun sim-l ke-i-a
 this potato-TOP plant-PROS.ADN **thing-COP-SFP**
 ‘This potato is for planting.’ (one for planting, not for e.g. cooking)

Stage 3: Future (Conjectural) *-lkeya/-lkeyyo* (17th c.(?))

ta cal toy-lkey-a
all well become-FUT-SFP
'Everything will be all right.'

Stage 4: Promissive SFP *-lkey/-lkeyyo* (20th c.)

nay-ka tow-a.cwu-lkey
I-NOM help-BEN-PROM
'I will help you.'

Stage 5: Imperative (Polite Request) *-lkey/-lkeyyo* (21st c. PDK)

(a receptionist to a client)
sonnim, camsi-man anc-ase kitali-si-lkey-yo
client a.moment-only sit-and wait-HON-IMP-POL
'Sir, please take a seat and wait just for a moment.'

Stage 6: Imperative (Command) *-lkey/-lkeyyo* (21st c. PDK)

(a head-beautician to her assistant)
3-pen sonnim mence mosi-lkey-yo
3-number client first serve-IMP-POL
'Please, serve the client at #3 first.'

4. Discussion

The grammaticalization of imperative from promissive, ultimately from a noun denoting 'thing', as described in the preceding exposition, presents a number of theoretical issues.

4.1. Idiosyncrasies in Korean

It has been observed that the speech act of command is often avoidable across languages. This is well illustrated by the point made by Narrog (2010)[17] that strong obligation markers are crosslinguistically not very common and even if available in a language, often not commonly used. The Korean language which shows fastidious concern in interpersonal relationship, fully equipped with multi-layered honorification and politeness marking grammatical devices, presents itself as one of the languages that avoid to the extreme level the impositive speech act, i.e. imperative (Koo 2004a[18], 2004b[19]). For this reason, alternative speech acts are well developed, e.g. using hortative 'let's' marked with honorification, thus effectively excluding the speaker himself/herself (e.g. *ka-si-psita* 'Please go' < 'Lit. 'Let's go honorably'); using pseudo-monologue question marked with politeness thus signaling its non-monologic intention (e.g. *ka-si-lkka-yo?* 'Please go' < Lit. 'Will (you) go honorably, I wonder'), etc.

The impositive nature of imperative speech act is so great that even the honorification-marking (i.e. *-si*-marking) does not rescue the speech act from the negative force. In other words, the [+honorific] feature in imperative forms progressively becomes neutralized by losing the illocutionary force of honorification. This is well illustrated in the fact that the honorification-marked command *Haseyo!* (< *ha-si-e-yo*) 'Do it' can be face-threatening. Indeed Korean seems to have continually developed alternative strategies in history, and these idiosyncrasies in Korean seem to be responsible for the development of imperative with the disguise of promissive in PDK.

4.2. Semantic and morpho-syntactic change

The development of imperative from a construction involving a noun denoting 'thing, skin, surface', as schematically presented in six stages in (9), shows that the meaning of the individual elements in the construction has undergone substantial semantic bleaching. In the final stage, the SFP *-lkey* is nearly unanalyzable in terms of its historical source (N.B. it is more so in Korean orthography and in actual pronunciation). What is notable in this

development is the increase of the intersubjectivity, i.e. intersubjectification (Traugott 2003[20], Traugott & Dasher 2002[21], Davids, Vandelanotte, Cuyckens 2010[22] and the works therein). The progression from a full-fledged noun denoting an entity in the real world, to a defective noun whose reference is often abstract and vague, to a grammatical marker of futurity largely denoting conjecture, to the promissive which encodes the volition and commitment in speaker-oriented interactional contexts, and further to the imperative which encodes the imposition of a duty in addressee-oriented interactional contexts is an instance of the gradual increase in the level of intersubjectivity and interactivity.

In terms of morpho-syntactic change, increasing syntagmatic bonding, a common concomitant of grammaticalization, is noteworthy. In this compacting process the internal composition of the resultant grammatical marker has been made opaque. Furthermore, there is a syntactic upgrading in that the formerly embedded predicate became the main predicate. In other words, the source structure with the copula *i-* as the main sentential predicate, as in (10a) is a complex sentence with a subordinate clause, but the sentence with the resultant imperative marker, as in (10b) is a simplex sentence (the same is applicable to futurity/promissive markers).

- (10) a. *i kamca-nun sim-l kes-i-a*
 this potato-TOP plant-PROS.ADN thing-COP-SFP
 ‘This potato is for planting.’ (< ‘This potato is a thing that we will plant.’)
- b. *ip com khukey pelli-lkey-yo*
 mouth a.little wide open-IMP-POL
 ‘Please open your mouth wide.’

Example (10a) is a complex sentence in which the subordinate clause involves an understood subject, i.e. ‘we’, of planting activity in the future, whereas the main clause has the copular predicate in the structure of [X is Y] (‘this potato is a thing’). On the other hand, the copula in (10b) is no longer visible and the perceived main predicate of the sentence is *PELLI-* ‘open’. This shows that the syntagmatic compacting process that obliterates the structural boundaries may ultimately yield an entirely different structure and, more importantly, a new grammatical category, i.e. the imperative marker, in the present case.

Furthermore, this grammaticalization instance supports the widely-held view that grammaticalization occurs at a local level (Hopper and Traugott 2003)[23], involving a construction, a particular kind of syntagmatic string, as opposed to other strings. The development of imperative, and of promissive as well, involves the prospective adnominalizer (PROS.ADN) only. Other adnominalizers, such as anterior adnominal (ANT.ADN) and simultaneous adnominal (SIM.ADN) are structurally compatible but were not recruited in the grammaticalization process. In the same manner, the defective noun *kes* ‘thing’ was chosen among other numerous defective nouns, and likewise, among many sentence-type markers only the familiar, informal ending *-a* (and its phonological variant *-e*) was chosen. Other comparable strings did not develop into a marker of grammatical notions. This supports the claim by Bybee, Perkins, Pagliuca (1994)[24] that what grammaticalizes is a construction rather than a word.

4.3. Discourse strategies

An analysis of the emergence of imperative from promissive reveals a number of discourse strategies. Most prominently it shows the strategy of solidarity building. Using the promissive form comparable to, for example, ‘I will clean up later,’ in order to convey the intended meaning of command, ‘Clean up later,’ the speaker is strategically saying it as if he or she intended to do it himself or herself. The addressee infers the intended meaning only based on the conversational situation. When the utterance is understood as it is intended to carry the imperative meaning, the sentence itself becomes ambiguous as to the grammatical subject, i.e. the agent of the ‘cleanup’ act. This ambiguity is crucially based on the fact that Korean allows omission of the subject, as was noted in the preceding discussion. This agent-ambiguity disappears and the promissive marker *-lkey* is reinterpreted as the imperative marker when the verb is marked with honorification, which is not possible for the first person subject. This is when the functional shift becomes evident.

This development is also an instance of the use of politeness strategy. Using an established imperative marker unavoidably brings forth potential face-threatening. When the command takes the form of a promise, the face-threatening becomes mitigated because the utterance *prima facie* is not addressed to the discourse partner.

Similarly, this grammaticalization process shows the so-called ‘borrowed mouth’ strategy (Rhee 2009)[25], an extreme case of subjectification. Rhee (2009)[25] lists a large number of grammaticalized and lexicalized forms that describe a person’s state-of-affairs by means of a quotative construction as if the person being described were saying something about himself or herself. For instance, the adverb *cwuknuntako* ‘self-pitifully’ was unverbated from ‘saying “I am dying”.’ Similarly, *michesstako* ‘nonsensically’ originated from ‘saying, “I am insane”’; *nacalnasstako* ‘haughtily’ from ‘saying, “I am great”.’ The present case, in which the promissive is used for imperative, is an instance of the borrowed-mouth strategy in that the command-issuer is saying something as if the addressee were saying it, i.e. the addressee is making a statement of his or her intention in the form of a promise. This is an instance of extreme empathy, i.e. intersubjectification, often observed in the care-taker’s language toward a child.

Another noteworthy strategy involved in the development extends the scope of the discourse event that triggers grammaticalization. Intersubjectification is conceptualized largely between the speaker and the addressee. What is notable, however, is that the grammaticalization under the present focus goes beyond intersubjectification, i.e. it was strongly motivated by the consideration of the people present in the scene. The discourse strategy attends to the audience within earshot. The use of this promissive-turned imperative is particularly often observed among service providers especially in businesses catering to high-class clientele. In other words, it is a service-providers’ in-group discourse strategy employed while clients are present in the scene. The rationale behind this is that employers (or high-ranking employees) issuing a command to their low-ranking employees in the presence of their clients may negatively affect the atmospheres of classy and posh businesses patronized by high-profile clients. The desire to avoid issuing commands in the presence of clients seems to have strongly motivated this grammatical change in which a mild form of speech act, i.e. promissive has been co-opted to encode a more potentially face-threatening speech act, i.e. imperative.

All these point to the fact that grammaticalization is indeed a multi-faceted process influenced by many ambient linguistic and extra-linguistic, situational factors that are present in individual instances of language use. They also call for the necessity of analyzing language use and grammatical change from multiple perspectives.

5. Summary and Conclusion

We have seen how an innovative imperative form is emerging in PDK. This newly emerging form is a subject of criticism among the prescriptive grammarians and the more conservative, normative-minded community members, i.e. they denounce the violation of grammatical rules by ‘misusing’ promissive in place of imperative. However, we have seen that the development was enabled by idiosyncratic features of the Korean language and its speech community such as a high level of grammaticalization of interactive, intersubjective notions, and the tendency of extreme avoidance of using imperatives. The development was also enabled by subjectification and morpho-syntactic compacting which rendered the linguistic formants opaque in terms of their original meanings and structures. It has also been pointed out that the development has been strongly motivated by diverse discourse strategies, such as solidarity building among discourse participants, interpersonal politeness, the speaker’s empathy toward the addressee (the ‘borrowed-mouth’ strategy), and further, the concern for the audience who are not directly addressed to but are present in the discourse scene, in order to create more friendly business atmospheres. These observations confirm that grammaticalization is a multi-faceted process influenced by myriads of linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

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